

Cultural Awareness as a Key Factor in Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence in EFL Education

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 13 Feb 2026; Received in revised form: 15 Mar 2026; Accepted: 18 Mar 2026; Available online: 21 Mar 2026 ©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords— Cultural Awareness, Intercultural Competence, EFL Learners, Communication Process,	<i>This study examines how cultural awareness influences the communicative competence of Sudanese EFL learners. Although linguistic proficiency is essential, effective communication in a foreign language also demands an understanding of the cultural norms and values inherent to it. It explores how students' grasp of cultural elements – including beliefs, social norms, discourse patterns, and communicative behaviors – affects their capacity to interact effectively in English. This study employs a descriptive analytical approach, utilizing a questionnaire as the main tool for gathering data. The study involved 50 undergraduate and postgraduate English majors from the Faculty of Education at the University of Gezira. The gathered data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings indicate that cultural background significantly influences communication practices, and a lack of awareness regarding the target language's culture frequently results in misunderstandings and ineffective communication. The findings also suggest that comparing learners' native culture with the target language culture enhances intercultural communicative competence and improves communication skills. The study concludes that incorporating cultural elements into EFL curricula is vital for fostering students' communicative competence. To facilitate more effective communication in English, it recommends that language instructors integrate cultural content into their materials, foster intercultural interaction, and cultivate positive attitudes toward foreign cultures.</i>

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, foreign language teaching has expanded beyond structural aspects to incorporate the cultural contexts that influence how language is used in real communication. Language learning requires understanding cultural values and social practices,

which is critical for developing communicative competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Contemporary EFL education emphasizes intercultural understanding, as noted by Ibrahim and Ezza (2018), yet many programs, particularly in Sudan, maintain a focus on linguistic structures over

cultural meanings. This oversight can lead to communication breakdowns due to a lack of pragmatic skills for navigating politeness and non-verbal cues.

Applied linguistics scholars argue that effective communication encompasses more than grammatical correctness; it necessitates comprehension of language in its sociocultural contexts. Dell Hymes emphasized the importance of sociocultural knowledge, while Michael Byram underscored intercultural competence in teaching. Language learners must decode cultural nuances and interact with diverse backgrounds. However, EFL classrooms often neglect cultural aspects, resulting in misunderstandings and communication challenges.

Cultural awareness is essential for successful language acquisition; it enables learners to understand implicit communication rules and culturally specific expressions. In Sudan, EFL students frequently struggle with English due to limited exposure to its cultural dimensions, as English is primarily taught academically rather than as a means of intercultural communication. This highlights the need for integrating cultural content in EFL teaching.

The study explores the impact of cultural awareness on Sudanese EFL learners' communicative competence and their intercultural interaction capabilities, aiming to enhance understanding of foreign cultures and improve communication skills. Findings will inform educators about the necessity of including cultural elements in language instruction to facilitate effective global communication.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The primary challenge for EFL learners in the Sudanese context is the significant barrier encountered when interpreting language that carries deep cultural connotations. While grammatical accuracy is often achieved, Ibrahim and Ezza (2018) argue that a "pedagogical neglect" of cultural features in the classroom prevents students from developing the sociopragmatic awareness necessary for fluid communication. This gap is not merely a matter of fluency; a lack of cultural context frequently results in communication breakdowns, unintended offense, and "problematic situations" during real-world interactions (Ibrahim & Ezza, 2018). Consequently, there is an urgent need to bridge the divide between

linguistic knowledge and cultural appropriateness to better prepare learners for global communication.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this research are as follows:

- a. To assist EFL learners in understanding the pragmatic and appropriate use of the target language, which is considered an essential component of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980).
- b. To improve students' communicative competence by integrating knowledge of the target language culture, since language and culture are inseparable elements of communication (Kramsch, 1998; Byram, 1997).
- c. To enable students to communicate effectively in diverse intercultural contexts, which is a key goal of intercultural communicative competence in foreign language education (Byram, 1997).
- d. To motivate EFL learners to develop positive attitudes toward the target language and its associated cultures, as attitudes and cultural awareness significantly influence successful second language communication (Gardner, 1985; Brown, 2007).

1.3 Questions of the Study

- a. To what extent do EFL learners encounter difficulties in understanding culturally-based expressions?
- b. To what extent EFL learners are aware of the impact cultural background when addressing people of different cultures?
- c. How far can lack of foreign cultural background lead to understand of FL2

1.4 Hypotheses of the Study

H1: A deep understanding of the target culture facilitates the accurate and appropriate use of English in real-life communication (Kramsch, 1998; Byram, 1997).

H2: Negative attitudes toward the target culture hinder effective communication among EFL learners, as motivation and attitudes are key factors in second language acquisition (Gardner, 1985; Brown, 2007).

H3: Systematic comparison between learners' native culture and the target culture enhances intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997; Hall, 1976).

1.5 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to both EFL pedagogy and intercultural communication research.

1. Pedagogical Relevance

Traditional English language teaching in many EFL contexts often focuses heavily on grammar and linguistic form while neglecting the cultural dimensions of communication. However, scholars argue that language learning must integrate cultural knowledge to achieve communicative competence (Kramsch, 1998; Byram, 1997).

2. Development of Communicative Competence

Cultural awareness helps learners interpret meaning appropriately in social interactions, thus preventing pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983).

3. Curriculum Development

The findings may assist curriculum designers in incorporating authentic cultural content that reflects real communicative contexts rather than purely structural language teaching (Brown, 2007).

4. Teacher Professional Development

The study highlights the importance of teachers acting as intercultural mediators, helping learners understand both linguistic and cultural aspects of communication (Byram, 1997).

5. Academic Contribution

By examining Sudanese EFL learners at the University of Gezira, this research contributes context-specific data to the broader field of intercultural communicative competence in EFL education.

1.6 Limitation of the Study

The limitation of this study is done at the Gezira University Faculty of Education Hasahesa the students majored in English language fourth year and MA students were included too.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Concept of Culture

Culture can be understood as a framework of shared beliefs, values, traditions, and behavioral norms that shape how members of a society interpret experiences and interact with others. Culture shapes how individuals perceive the world, interpret experiences, and communicate with others. Tylor (1871) defined culture as:

"That complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by individuals as members of society."

One of the earliest definitions of culture was proposed by Tylor (1871), who described culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by individuals as members of society." This definition highlights the learned and social nature of culture. Later scholars expanded the concept by emphasizing the dynamic relationship between culture and communication.

Hall (1976) argues that culture and communication are inseparable because communication patterns are deeply rooted in cultural values and social norms. According to Hall, individuals interpret messages through culturally conditioned frameworks, which influence how meaning is produced and understood. Similarly, Hofstede (2001) defines culture as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes members of one group from another. His research highlights how cultural differences affect communication styles, attitudes toward authority, and social interaction.

In the field of applied linguistics, culture is closely connected to language learning. Kramsch (1998) argues that language "expresses, embodies, and symbolizes cultural reality." Through language, individuals convey cultural meanings, identities, and social relationships. Therefore, learning a language involves not only mastering grammar and vocabulary but also understanding the cultural contexts in which the language is used.

Modern scholars emphasize that culture should be viewed as a dynamic and evolving system rather than a fixed set of traditions. Risager (2006) argues that globalization and intercultural contact have

transformed the concept of culture into a more flexible and interconnected phenomenon. As a result, language education must prepare learners to communicate effectively across diverse cultural settings.

2.2 Cultural Awareness in EFL Learning

Cultural awareness is widely recognized as an essential component of effective foreign language learning. It refers to the ability to recognize cultural differences, understand diverse perspectives, and interact appropriately with people from other cultural backgrounds. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), cultural awareness enables learners to interpret meaning accurately and avoid misunderstandings during communication.

Byram (1997) introduced the concept of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), which emphasizes that successful communication requires more than linguistic knowledge. According to Byram (1997), successful intercultural communication requires learners to cultivate openness toward cultural differences and develop the ability to interpret cultural meanings during interaction. These abilities allow learners to interact effectively in intercultural situations.

Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) also emphasize the importance of cultural awareness in language education. They argue that language teachers should help students understand how cultural norms influence communication patterns, social relationships, and everyday interactions. When learners become aware of these cultural aspects, they can interpret language more accurately and respond more appropriately in conversations.

In many EFL contexts, learners have limited opportunities to interact directly with native speakers of English. Consequently, cultural misunderstandings may arise when learners apply the norms of their native culture while communicating in English. According to Liddicoat and Scarino (2013), integrating cultural learning into language instruction can help learners develop intercultural sensitivity and improve their communication skills.

Research has also shown that students who receive cultural instruction demonstrate higher levels of communicative competence and intercultural awareness. For instance, Byram and Feng (2004) found

that cultural learning activities encourage students to reflect on cultural differences and develop more flexible communication strategies. Similarly, Baker (2015) argues that cultural awareness in EFL classrooms should focus not only on native English-speaking cultures but also on the diverse global contexts in which English is used.

2.3 Culture and Communication in Language Learning

Communication is a culturally embedded process that involves more than the exchange of words. Cultural norms influence how individuals express ideas, interpret messages, and interact with others. Therefore, understanding cultural contexts is essential for effective communication in a foreign language.

Hymes (1972) introduced the concept of communicative competence, which refers to the ability to use language appropriately in different social situations. Communicative competence extends beyond grammar to include the ability to adapt language according to social context and communicative purpose. Learners must understand when it is appropriate to speak, how to express politeness, and how to adjust language according to the social context.

Pragmatics plays a significant role in communication because it focuses on how meaning is interpreted within specific contexts. Thomas (1983) identifies two types of pragmatic failure: pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure. Pragmalinguistic failure occurs when learners misuse linguistic forms, while sociopragmatic failure arises when learners misunderstand cultural norms governing language use. Both types of failure can lead to communication breakdown.

For example, expressions of politeness differ widely across cultures. In some cultures, direct communication is considered acceptable, whereas in others indirect expressions are preferred. Without cultural awareness, EFL learners may unintentionally appear rude or inappropriate when interacting with speakers from different cultural backgrounds.

Brown (2007) emphasizes that language teaching should integrate cultural explanations and authentic communicative activities. Such approaches allow learners to experience how language functions within real social contexts. Similarly, Kramsch (1993) argues

that language classrooms should create opportunities for learners to explore cultural meanings and develop intercultural understanding.

2.4 Cultural Awareness and the Development of Communication Skills

Developing cultural awareness plays a crucial role in improving communication skills among EFL learners. When learners understand cultural norms and social expectations, they become more capable of interpreting messages accurately and responding appropriately in conversations.

Gudykunst (2004) suggests that effective intercultural communication depends on individuals' ability to manage uncertainty and adapt their communication behavior to different cultural contexts. Cultural awareness helps learners recognize differences in communication styles, such as levels of formality, politeness strategies, and conversational norms.

Empirical research supports the importance of cultural awareness in language education. Liddicoat (2008) argues that cultural learning encourages students to reflect on their own cultural assumptions while developing respect for other cultures. This reflective process enhances learners' ability to engage in meaningful intercultural communication.

Furthermore, incorporating cultural content into EFL instruction can increase students' motivation and engagement. According to Baker (2016), learners who explore cultural topics in language classrooms often develop a deeper understanding of global communication and become more confident in using English in international contexts.

Teachers can promote cultural awareness through various instructional strategies. These include the use of authentic materials, cultural case studies, role-play activities, and discussions of intercultural scenarios. Such activities expose learners to real-life communication situations and help them practice culturally appropriate language use.

2.5 Cultural Awareness in the Global Use of English

The global spread of English has transformed the role of culture in language learning. English is no longer associated exclusively with native English-speaking countries but is widely used as an international language among speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Jenkins (2015) argues that English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has created new patterns of intercultural communication. In ELF contexts, speakers often negotiate meaning by drawing on multiple cultural perspectives. Therefore, cultural awareness in EFL education should include an understanding of global communication rather than focusing solely on British or American culture.

Baker (2015) emphasizes that language learners need to develop intercultural communicative competence that enables them to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. This approach encourages learners to view English as a tool for global communication rather than as a representation of a single culture.

Consequently, modern language education increasingly emphasizes intercultural learning. This approach prepares learners to participate in diverse communication environments and fosters mutual understanding among people from different cultural backgrounds.

III. METHODOLOGY

This section includes the research methodology, population, and sample of the study, instrument of data collection and analysis reliability and validity of the instrument used.

3.1 Population

The researcher chooses 50 students who are specialized in English language teaching faculty of education- Hasaheha, University of Gezira. Among those were MA students.

3.2 The Sample of the Study

The sample has been used in terms of gender included male and female students that varied in number 35 male and 25 female students and their ages between 25 to 35 years. Both were students specialized in English language at different university levels Bachelor, final level and Master students.

3.3 Instrument of the Study

The researcher has adopted the questionnaire as the tool to carry-out this study. It is distributed to the English language students and M.A. students at faculty of Education University of Gezira - Hasaheha. The instrument has been judged in terms of validity and reliability.

3.4 Reliability and Validity of the Questionnaire

The study used the SPSS program for the statistical analytical operations. The researcher

In this study the researcher used Pearson correlation through half-methods.

Table 1: lack of students' cultural background impedes comprehension of linguistics features and aspects.

Options	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	11	22.0
Disagree	4	8.0
Neutral	5	10.0
Agree	27	54.0
Strongly disagree	3	6.0
Total	50	100.0

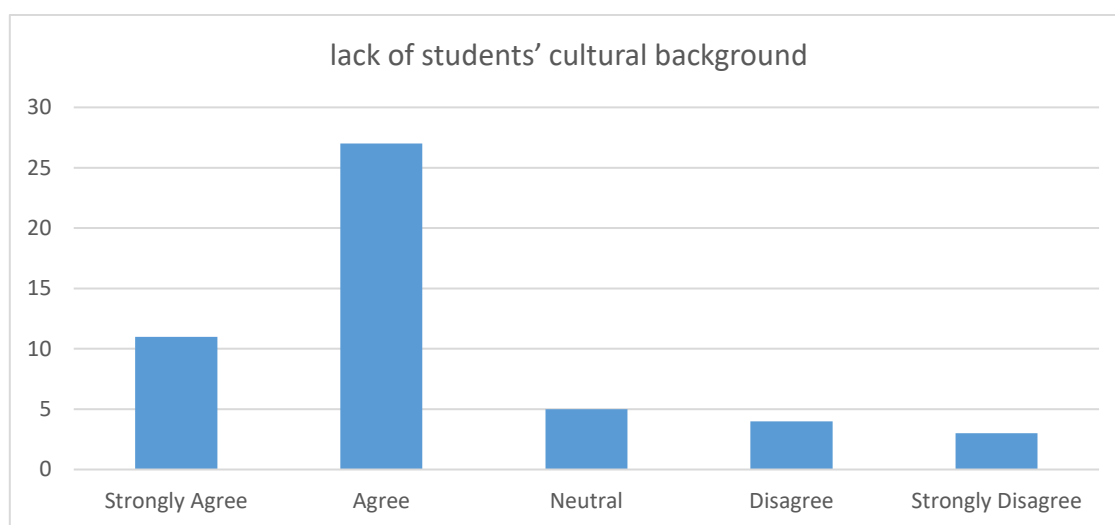


Fig.4.1

The sample's responses to this statement show three options: teachers who choose strongly agree represent 22% (11 teachers) and those who supported agree option represent 74% (37 teachers) just 4% (2 teachers) choose disagree option. This result interpret that the lack of students cultural back ground impedes the comprehension of cultural features and aspects that leads to miscommunication.

Table 2: Language and cultural barriers lead to significant misunderstandings in communication.

Options	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	19	38.0
Agree	14	28.0
Neutral	9	18.0
Disagree	6	12.0
Strongly disagree	2	4.0
Total	50	100.0

Table (4.2) can be represented by the following figure:

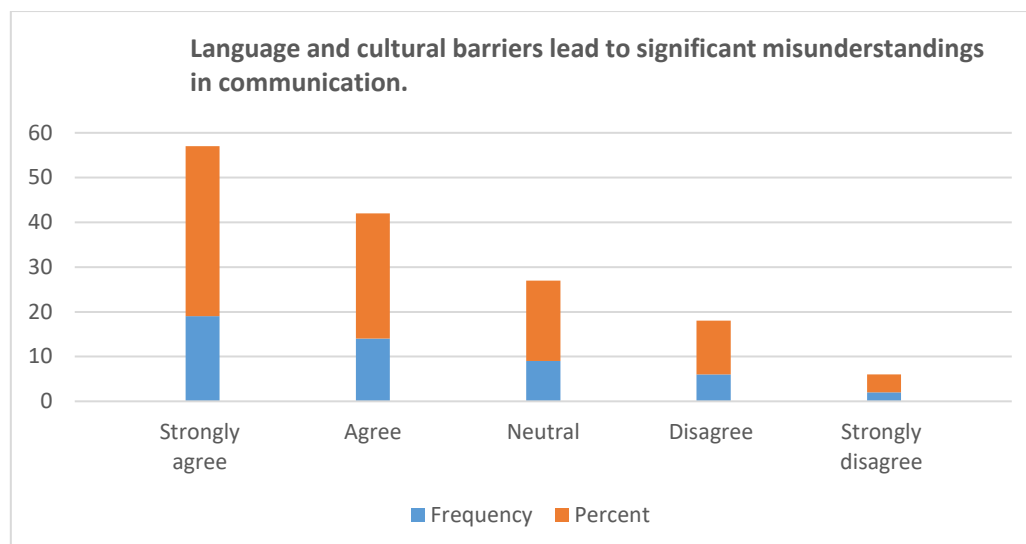


Fig.4.2

The sample's responses to this statement show five options: teachers who choose strongly agree represent 38% (19 teachers) and those who supported agree option represent 28% (14 teachers) just 4% (2 teachers) choose strongly disagree option. This result interpret that Language and cultural barriers lead to significant misunderstandings in communication.

IV. DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide empirical support for the theoretical frameworks proposed by Dell Hymes and Michael Byram regarding Cultural Awareness as a Key Factor in Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence in EFL Education.

5.1 Findings of the Study

1. Cultural background is an important component in communication process in different levels (Bachelor and Master Students).
2. Misunderstandings resulting from poor communication.
3. Negative attitudes towards foreign culture leads to miscommunication.
4. Real contact with native speakers improve communicative competence.
5. Comparison between home and the target culture develop student cultural awareness
6. The ignorance of cultural features and aspects lead to ineffective communication.

7. Teaching educational materials that contain cultural aspects and connotations require qualified English teacher.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings that cultural awareness as a key factor in developing intercultural communicative competence in EFL education, the following actions are recommended for the Faculty of Education at the University of Gezira:

1. Curriculum Integration: Cultural components should be explicitly woven into the English language syllabus rather than treated as optional content.
2. Early Intervention: Dedicated communication courses focusing on sociopragmatic skills should be introduced starting from the first year of the degree program.
3. Enhanced Language Labs: Existing or new language labs should be utilized not just for phonetics, but as "cultural hubs" where students can engage with authentic audio-visual materials and simulate intercultural interactions.
4. Direct Intercultural Contact: The department should facilitate opportunities for students to interact with native speakers, whether through digital exchange programs or invited guest speakers, to build real-world cultural awareness.

5. Teacher Training: English instructors should receive specialized training to become "intercultural mediators" who are sophisticated in their knowledge of both the native and target cultures.

5.3 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the relationship between language and culture is inseparable within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The findings reveal that for Sudanese learners, linguistic accuracy alone does not guarantee successful interaction; rather, cultural awareness serves as the mechanical bridge to effective communication.

The data confirms that a lack of sociopragmatic knowledge frequently leads to communication breakdown and unintended misunderstandings. However, by fostering a positive attitude toward the target culture and employing comparative pedagogical strategies, educators can significantly enhance students' intercultural communicative competence.

Ultimately, integrating cultural components into the EFL curriculum is not merely an academic supplement but an essential requirement for preparing learners to navigate the complexities of global communication. It is hoped that these insights will encourage a shift toward more culturally-informed teaching practices at the University of Gezira and beyond

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